

## [Transcript] The Rest Is History / 352: Amsterdam: Kings, Canals, and Coffee Houses

Hello, welcome to The Rest is History and we are in the heart of Amsterdam, aren't we, Tom? Now, if you didn't hear our last episode, we are exploring the history of Amsterdam with WISE. Now, Tom, as you will know, WISE is the international account that is built to save you money around the world. You love that, don't you, Tom? 150 countries, 40 currencies, I'm just one account. And as you are always saying to me, I mean, God Almighty, if I had a pound to bear the number of times you've said this to me, with WISE, you can spend like a local. And Dominic, more importantly, you could spend like a Dutch capitalist in the golden age of Amsterdam.

So Dominic, at the end of the last episode, we were talking about Amsterdam as simultaneously this inward-looking and this outward-looking city. So this concern with the domestic, with the interior

kind of privacy, while at the same time Amsterdam is really the kind of the great smithy of what will become European globalization, expanding trade networks, all the wealth and goods and commodities of the world coming to Amsterdam. So the people here are,

certainly the elites are fabulously rich. So Amsterdam is absolutely a boom town.

It's the 17th century.

It's the 17th century. But the Dutch Republic is still at war. The Spanish are still out there.

And so the old center of Amsterdam is kind of girded around by this canal, the single and by a wall. And basically, you're not encouraged to build beyond that. But people ignore that.

They're camping out on what remains basically a bog.

The Amsterdam literally means boggy land next to a river.

And the land beyond the old town hasn't yet been drained. But Amsterdam is becoming so rich and it's becoming so full that over the course of the 17th century, people decide, this is insane, we need to expand. So they start to move beyond the single, this canal that surrounds the old town.

And they build what are probably the iconic image of Amsterdam in people's imagination.

If they kind of think of Amsterdam, they will think of these three great ring canals that were built in the 17th century. So the Herengracht. So that's the canal for gentlemen. The gentlemen's canal, the Kaiser's gracht, the emperor's canal, and the prince's canal. And we are standing on the Herengracht, which is the most exclusive of those three canals.

And just to compete with the traffic and to paint a picture for those people who haven't been to Amsterdam, forget about the traffic noise. It's an idyllic scene, these tremendously impressive kind of merchants' townhouses along the sides of the canal, to bicycles and all that stuff. Yeah. And where we're standing is called the Golden Bend. So it's the most prestigious stretch of the most prestigious canal. And the amazing thing about these three canals, that they look perfect, and people have always thought, historians of the development of Amsterdam, have always traditionally thought that there was a kind of master plan. But it turns out, actually, there probably wasn't, that it was built in three separate stages, which makes the site kind of a sense of coherence, the controlled sense of beauty, all the more extraordinary. I mean, it's one of the great urban panoramas of Europe and the world, I would say. And what makes it all the more extraordinary is, as I say, the effort of construction, because all these stunning houses, the roads, all the infrastructure is built on the marshiest terrain imaginable.

And so the reason that there are canals, these have to be kind of dredged out.

The mud has to be piled up on the banks, has to be mixed with sand and with gravel.

Roads have to be laid down with brick. And if you're going to build houses, then you need to kind of drive down wood, great piles of wood. So logs that are sourced from Scandinavia. And they have to be jammed down kind of 50, 60 feet into the peat, into the sand, into the clay. And those logs are still there to this day, because they've been covered over by water, so the wood has been preserved. And it was such an effort to build these, that one of the reason why these houses are very high, kind of five, six stories, is that basically, if you've gone to all the expense and effort of driving down these kind of piles to support the houses on, you might as well build it high. And so throughout the 17th century, it's the golden age, it's the age of Rembrandt, it's the age of kind of scientific inquiry. And we look around and this is a beautiful, beautiful urban cityscape. But throughout the 17th century, this was a massive, massive building site, I mean, ongoing for decades and decades and decades. And I think that one of the ways in which you can measure what the impact was of this on people who lived in Amsterdam, is to look at the paintings and the drawings of Rembrandt, its greatest artist, the artist who moved and lived here for most of his life. And what you will find is that he doesn't actually paint or draw anything of what is going on with this new development. So again and again, if he's making sketches of the cityscape, he will do views towards the old city or towards the open fields. He will not sketch what is being developed. So almost like he's literally turned his back on this new, I suppose the equivalent of the megalopolis of 21st century China, temples to capitalism. Absolutely. So there's a sense that Rembrandt and his attitude to this new architecture is a bit of a King Charles III. He's not in favour of it. But clearly, if you're a massive, high-spending capitalist with lots of cash, you're really into it. And so the house that we're looking at at the moment is one of the grandest, most impressive, most beautiful houses on the entire stretch of the Herringgrack. And this is the house van der Graaf. So this is the mayor of Amsterdam's house. Andries, what's his name? Andries de Graaf. Yes, he was a mayor of the city, he was one of its richest men. And he's one of two brothers who basically run Amsterdam as a Republican form of government throughout its golden age. So Tom, just as we start talking about the politics, let's move away from the man assembling an air conditioning unit. So at this point, the Netherlands is the Dutch Republic. It is not a monarchy. Am I right? Right. So basically, there are two kind of political factions in the various provinces that constitute the Dutch Republic. So there's a Republican faction of which the de Graaf brothers are leaders in Amsterdam. They're also the De Vits in The Hague. And these are kind of the equivalents of grand senators, leaders of what are effectively city-states. But over and above that, you have the figure of the Statholder, which has become a kind of hereditary post held by the descendants of William the Silent, William of Orange, who was the great hero of the Dutch revolt. And so the Statholders are well, I suppose actually dominate that the best English translation would be Lord Protector. Oh, very good. You know, I love a Lord Protector. Yes, I know you do. So there's a tension there between the claims of the cities and the claims of the Statholder of the House of Orange. So these tensions come to a head in Amsterdam in 1650, when William II, who is the Statholder, the Prince of Orange, he comes to Amsterdam and he basically tries to kind of conquer it and suppress the pretensions of the town council. The de Graafs play a blinder. They basically say to Willem, look, we're on your side, there are people who post you on the town council, let's get rid of them. And they serve up their rivals on the town council, get rid of them. And then they're able to install this with enormous stroke of luck that obviously to the de Graafs would be the sign of God. Willem then dies of smallpox. Right. And he leaves a very

young son, Willem again, they're not very original with their naming, who will be the William III, who conquers England in 1688. But he's a very young boy at this point. So essentially, the de Graafs now have a kind of free hand to run the city. And they do this up until 1672, which the Dutch commemorate as the Rampjaar, the year of disasters, which is when Louis XIV invades the English, I'm afraid to say, Institute of Naval Blockade.

Afraid to say.

The David brothers are lynched, and according to some stories, devoured by a hostile mob. Willem III kind of absolutely establishes his authority as stadtholder. The de Graafs lose power. But Andrews de Graaf doesn't, I mean, he keeps his life, he keeps his wealth, and he keeps this absolutely splendid house. So we are looking at the house right now, aren't we?

There's a bit of scaffolding, but you can see the tremendous coats of arms at the top, which is this sort of swan, and it looks like a bit like a mushroom. I don't know what it is.

No, it's a shovel.

A shovel, okay.

And the motto of the graph was, death makes sepulchres and hoes equal.

So this is the idea that his house is built on the side of this canal, which has been dug with hoes and with shovels and with spades. And he's kind of glorying in that as something that is greater than the monarchical pretensions of the House of Orange.

He also, inside, he had one of the greatest art collections of the age. So we've mentioned Rembrandt. He had Rembrandt's in there. Rembrandt painted him, but various other artworks by the great painters of the age. So on one level, it's absolutely sumptuous and splendid. But on the other, bearing in mind that this isn't... He's not just one of the richest men in Amsterdam. He's one of the richest men in the world. He is a plutocrat on a scale of a kind of Jeff Bezos or Mark Zuckerberg. And by those standards, it's actually pretty modest.

Yeah. So that is actually the most striking thing about this, I think. So there are working class districts being built at the same time. So there's a place called Jordaan, which is kind of beyond the Princeton grut, which is the canal for merchants.

It's a lovely area, actually, Jordaan now, Tom.

Yeah, it is. But I think one of the striking things about this is that the streets that kind of join the canals are actually... They were built as much more working class areas. So it's exclusive, but it's not completely exclusive. It's not a kind of upper class ghetto.

And again, I think that that is expressive of this Dutch sense of a kind of civic community that is a contrast with the grandiose pomposity of architecture, particularly in France.

Right. Absolutist monarchy, Catholic monarchy of Louis XIV. It must be a self-consciously deliberate political contrast. The Dutch see themselves as Protestants, as you said, civic.

As modest.

Yeah, modest.

Yes, absolutely. And so looking at this crest that you've mentioned that's on the top of this, and it does look, I mean, it looks very splendid, but it's nothing compared to the coat of arms that you get at Versailles or anything like that. Or indeed, in the palaces in England, you get these crests and these emblems all over the city. So as scribes, for instance, you'll see a hand with a quill. Right.

Or when I came here with Sadie, my wife, she's a midwife, she was very excited to see that there was a stork outside a house, you know, emblem of a midwife who lived there.

My favorite one of all. So there is one of these secret churches that we talked about in the first episode. It was a remonstrant church, so another kind of Protestant sect on the Kaiser's Gracht. And they bought this building from a guy called a Ruttut, which means red hat. And so they advertised this completely secret church by whacking an emblem of a great red hat on it. So that's splendid. And what you will also see on lots of these houses, and particularly the houses on the Princeton Gracht, but also on the Heron Gracht and the Kaiser's Gracht as well, is that at the top of the houses, so where the crest is on the Grafshaus, you will see kind of hoist beams.

Right, and hooks. Now, I was going to ask you about the hooks. So what's all that about? Warehouses or their stuff?

Yes, particularly on the Princeton Gracht. So for merchants, their houses double as store houses and warehouses. And so stuff will be lifted up.

And they will keep stuff right at the top of the house.

But they're not just warehouses, right? So they're not just public spaces, they're private.

I mean, we talked last time about the Begainhof and this inward-looking the sense of privacy and domesticity. And that's true of these houses as well, isn't it?

Yes, because the wealth that these merchants have and these kind of great princes of the city enables them to construct within a single domestic space the kind of inward turning the love of privacy that in the Middle Ages had been confined within squares.

And so whether it is a great kind of, you know, a mayor of the city like Andres de Graf, or whether it is kind of much more modest house, Amsterdam in the 17th century in its domestic architecture is committing itself to something that is really novel and incredibly influential.

The idea that a house can be a private and personal space. And this is the ideal that I know that both of us have been to see the Vermeer exhibition, which is on at the Rijksmuseum here in Amsterdam

at the moment. And famously, Vermeer is, you know, in his paintings is kind of articulating this sense. And it's the same sense that in the episode that we did on the Dutch maid, the housemaids, you know, English and foreign visitors, when they come here and they walk into the house and the housemaid has just spent all day cleaning the floor. And she will attack visitors with her broom and forcibly remove their shoes so that they don't spread dirt in.

This obsession with cleanliness, the obsession with kind of scrubbing,

it's something incredibly momentous. I mean, basically it's the birth of the bourgeois domestic ideal that middle classes across the West and indeed increasingly across the world are now wedded to. And it has its birth here in Amsterdam. Okay, let's move on to the next location in just a second. So we are going to be moving on to the Royal Palace now. Very exciting. So let's go there.

Right. So I mentioned how, you know, these houses on the canals need a lot of wood and support the Royal Palace, which is back on Dam Square. I mean, that really does require an awful lot of wood.

And we'll go and look at it now. So Tom, you were just talking to me about wood.

That was very exciting. I was. And we've moved back to Dam Square. Where we began.

And we're facing this enormous building. And I believe you're going to say,

talk to me some more about wood. Yes. So this was the town hall that was opened by Andrés de Graf's brother Cornelis on the 29th of July, 1655. And when it was built, by Miles, the largest building in Amsterdam, in fact, it was one of the largest buildings in Europe. I think St. Peter's in Rome, the Scoriae, the Dogell Palace in Venice,

were basically the only buildings that could rival it. So it's a very, very large kind of 17th century palace. Pretty monumental. It is. And the total number of wood required to support this, because it's basically floating on a bog, is 13,659 pieces of Scandinavian timber. Right. And this was the town hall. So it was a monument not to a king or a royal family, but sort of civic virtue. And so inside, it is decorated with all kinds of improving murals. So you've got scenes from classical history, obviously scenes from the Bible, illustrating patriotic sacrifice, incorruptibility, civic virtue, lots of comparisons being made between Amsterdam and ancient Israel. That's one thing you haven't mentioned that I was going to ask you about. So people in the Dutch Republic, they do have a sense of themselves as a kind of chosen people, don't they? Completely. Yes, absolutely they do. And also, it's rather like the East India House, which is situating Amsterdam as the kind of the center of the turning world. This is made manifest inside the city hall, because you have a great map of the world there with Amsterdam absolutely at its center. And this building becomes the emblem for the greatness, the wealth, the power of Amsterdam and of the Dutch Republic more generally. And so there's a famous encomium that is given by a palpably very, very jealous Englishman, a man called William Algin B, who was a fellow of the Royal Society in the mid 17th century, who said that scarce any subject occurs more frequent in the discourse of ingenious men than that of the marvelous progress of this little state, which in the space of about 100 years have grown to a height not only infinitely transcending all the ancient republics of Greece, but not much inferior in some respects, even to the greatest monarchies of these later ages. The irony is, Tom, that at precisely this moment, the 1650s and then the 1660s and so on, the Dutch are fighting wars against the English, winning some of them. And the French in due course. And the French. But of course, they are about to be outstripped by the marvelous progress of an even more admirable state. Am I wrong? Well, so the English in particular are incredibly jealous of the Dutch. So we have had occasion before to speak of the disgraceful behavior of the Dutch fleet in raiding the naval dockyards at Chatham, the Medway, the raid on the Medway. So there is absolutely Anglo-Dutch rivalry throughout the 1650s under Cromwell, throughout the 1660s under Charles II. And then of course, under James II, who's a Catholic, the Statholder, William III, who we talked about while we were standing outside Andres, the Graf's house. He's a little boy when his dad dies of smallpox. But by 1688, he's the most impressive Protestant leader in Europe. And basically, 1688, he launches an invasion of England. He occupies London. And it's effectively a merger between Amsterdam and London, between the two great capitalist engines. It's not really a conquest, is it? In the sense that he's been invited by kind of weak oligarchs. And there is a real sense of a kind of merger of the sort of the wealth, the manpower, the resources of England, the naval resources and so on, with the naus, the financial innovations, the sort of civic culture, the ambition of the Dutch. Yeah. I mean, you see the influence of Dutch in all kinds of English maritime words. So Jot is a Dutch word, Blunderbuss, Schooner, all that kind of thing. So the influence of Dutch capitalism and Dutch globalism on the English is enormous, both as an inspiration and as a kind of rivalry. And so basically, by the late 17th, going into the 18th century, there's a sense in which the English are doing to the Dutch what the Dutch had done to the Portuguese. That's karma, Tom. But let me, I want to ask you, we're in Amsterdam. We'll be talking about

Amsterdam.

But what about New Amsterdam? So that's what becomes New York. So is that a kind of symbol of that?

Yeah, absolutely. Because New Amsterdam is a Dutch settlement, but gets lost to the English.

By terms of a treaty that ends one of the kind of perennial Anglo-Dutch wars and becomes New York.

So that's the perfect kind of illustration of this process whereby the Dutch East India Company, also on the other side of the world, is increasingly put under the shadow in India of the British East India Company. So in the 18th century, Holland is regressing, isn't it? It's falling down the table of world powers. It is. But there's a sense in which, I mean, it's still fabulously rich. It's still very, very significant centre. But I think it is coming to seem less exceptional.

So the path blazed by the Dutch is one that others are now following. I mean, one way in which the Netherlands and Amsterdam in particular does remain incredibly significant is that the tradition that was there right the way through the 16th and 17th centuries of this being a place where you could say and think and publish things that you couldn't do anywhere else. That remains a very, very kind of vivid tradition. The paradigmatic figure who illustrates that is Spinoza, a Jew who famously gets kind of excommunicated by the Jewish community here in Amsterdam. And whose writings, they like

the touch paper to what Jonathan Israel, the great historian of early modern Netherlands, and the Enlightenment has called the radical Enlightenment. So throughout the 18th century, books that are incredibly scandalous. So the most notorious is a book called The Three Imposters. And the Three Imposters are Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. And that's published in Amsterdam. And really, I mean, it's the only place where you could publish it. And that's drawing on the legacy of Amsterdam, not just as a great capitalist entropo, but it's a place where people from other countries come to explore and express ideas that can't be explored and expressed elsewhere. So Descartes, we've mentioned already, Descartes. They're loving it. The Descartes comes here. Thomas Hobbes is published here. Locke comes here. So there is absolutely a sense in which this remains kind of in intellectual terms, incredibly important. And so when in the second half of the 18th century, you get first the American Revolution, and then the French Revolution, there is a sense in the part of people in Amsterdam who feel, well, this is an expression of stuff that we started.

Right. But then they end up fighting the French. Don't they, the French invade in what, 1795?

Well, actually kind of less than you would think, because there's such enthusiasm first

for the American cause against the British. Very shameful behavior on the part of the Amsterdammers. But then in the French Revolution, large numbers of people in Amsterdam are on the side of the French revolutionaries to the degree that the Statholder, who's still a descendant of William the Silent, the House of Orange, he goes into exile in England. And Dutch revolutionaries in Amsterdam proclaim a republic. So it becomes the Batavian Republic after the Batavians, who are the kind of the ancient people who lived in this vicinity back in the early Roman times. And the French invade, the Dutch revolutionaries rise up.

And it's a little bit like 1688 in reverse. It's both an invasion and a revolution and a merger.

So the Batavian Republic is proclaimed in January 1795. And the Dutch welcome the French to Amsterdam

by hanging tricolours over the canals. So, hurrah for the republic. The Dutch have this indigenous tradition of republicanism that doesn't actually need the French to inspire them.

But the French, I'm afraid, then behave very badly.

You astound me, too.

They badly let the Dutch republicans down. Because in 1806, Napoleon installs his younger brother, Louis, as king. And so Louis moves into the city hall, the town hall, the building over there, which is the great emblem of Dutch republicanism. And he turns it into the royal palace. Of course he does. He's actually surprisingly popular. So he goes to great lengths to learn Dutch. And everybody who's shown me around Amsterdam always tells the same story. My Dutch probably isn't up to recycling it. But apparently his Dutch was very bad. I mean, who am I to cast a stone? And he described himself as Koenig van Oland, rather than Koenig van Holland. So this apparently is hilarious, because apparently he was calling himself the rabbit of Holland. I genuinely heard someone saying that in the street yesterday. Right.

So a group of tourists. So it's a great story.

Clearly this is the one Dutch story about Louis Napoleon. So he became himself a rabbit, rather than the king. And he was such a good king that he got called Louis the Good.

So he sets up the museum that in the long run will become the Rijksmuseum.

So the Rijksmuseum is founded by a Frenchman, which is something that generally isn't.

Theo, our producer, loves this. He's nodding away.

He purports to be French.

But Napoleon is very contemptuous of this title that Louis Napoleon gets of Louis the Good, and says that, brother, when they say of some king or other that he is good, it means that he has failed in his rule.

I'm with Napoleon on that, actually. Absolutely.

Well, but I think Napoleon is saying this, because in 1810 he basically abolishes the kingdom of the Netherlands. Just resorts into France.

He just resorts into France. So Amsterdam becomes part of Greater France.

And then in 1813, Napoleon's empire is collapsing.

The French withdraw.

Vilem comes back from exile.

Yes.

He's told her and is proclaimed king.

So he's the first Dutch king.

So the city hall remains the Royal Palace, and it is the Royal Palace to this day.

Nineteenth century, things speed up.

But, Tom, you know what you haven't talked about?

What?

That the Dutch never talk about.

What?

Because they're ashamed.

What?

The loss of Belgium.

So the Belgian Revolution, when the Belgians cast off Dutch oppression.

But it's nothing really to do with Amsterdam, is it?

Well, it's the dark side of the Dutch character, isn't it?

No.

They were such hideous overlords that the Belgians couldn't take it.

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Everything in the 19th century, Amsterdam, it's still very liberal, Dominic.  
Very progressive.  
So the first railway station is built in...  
I'm going to put my cards on the table, Tom.  
I actually prefer Belgium to Holland.  
I think the food is better in Belgium.  
I love Belgium, but I...  
The chips are better in Belgium.  
I love Holland better.  
Holland has a better name.  
Go on, finish your...  
Okay, okay.  
So, so railways, first Dutch railway built in 1839.  
I've got a lemon in Belgium as well, go on.  
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know.  
So actually, although they're built later, the Rijksmuseum and the railway central station  
are both built by a Catholic.  
Are they?  
Yeah.  
So if you like Belgium, art galleries and railway stations built by Catholics.  
Amsterdam, Scotland too.  
So, so there you go.  
1848, we talked about with Christopher Clark and our...  
He sang about it.  
He did, yes.  
That this kind of liberal revolution basically establishes the Dutch constitution that survives to this  
day.  
So the Dutch have, at this point, they're a monarchy.  
They are, and they're still a monarchy.  
Yeah.  
I mean, that's the interesting thing, isn't it?  
Were it not for the French Revolution and Napoleon that they would still be a republic?  
Yeah.  
So the French Revolution results in the city palace becoming the royal palace.  
The irony.  
Yeah.  
And then it becomes one of these European cities that are kind of motors of international capitalism  
and industrialized capitalism in the late 19th century.  
Yes. So the Dutch have always remained, you know, they've always been a very commercial people,  
a polite and commercial people.  
Yes.  
And really where we're sitting now in Dam Square is the perfect exemplification of that.  
The Beehive.  
The Beehive.



The Beenkorf.

De Beenkorf, Tom.

Yeah, sorry.

Sorry.

Beether us, by the way, speak Dutch.

But do address all your, as I've already said, address all your remarks.

Tom, please, not to me.

So it's founded in 1870 as a haberdashery store,

but it's rebuilt in 1909 basically to be the Dutch Selfridges.

And in fact, it is owned today by the Selfridges Group.

Now, Tom, I do like a department store and I also like a trinket or knickknack or souvenir.

A clog, a windmill.

I'd like to get a miniature windmill.

That's what I'd like to get.

Cheese wrapped up in red wax.

Shall we go over there right now?

Let's go and do that.

And do you have perhaps a card?

I've got my wise card.

Your wise card.

My wise app, actually.

I'm going to be using the app on my phone.

I heartily recommend it to our listeners.

Let's go and do that right now.

So, Tom, here we are.

We've actually gone to a different place.

We've gone to 100% Holland.

You chose the shop for narcissistic reasons.

It literally had my name on it.

Had your name on it.

Now, we've selected this lovely tin of Holland Waffles, Strube Waffle, I think they call them.

I'm going to pay for them, Tom, with something very exciting.

I'm going to pay for them with my wise app.

Because the thing about wise, you can spend in 40 different currencies.

And if you're on the go, as you so often are with your travels,

and you don't have the local currency in your wise account, Tom,

they were auto-converted at the mid-market exchange rate,

with absolutely no markups and no hidden fees.

Because I hate a markup and I hate a hidden fee.

Well, you don't have to worry.

So, wise is the card for me.

You're in 100% Holland.

You've got your wise thing.

No markups.

You're laughing.  
I literally couldn't be happier.  
Right. Brilliant.  
Everybody's happy.  
Let's go and pay for these waffles.  
Hello.  
Let's pay for these lovely waffles, please.  
Oh, yes, please.  
Thank you.  
Just going to pay with my wise app here.  
That was incredibly convenient, Dominic.  
Thank you.  
Thank you, Will.  
No markups.  
No hidden charges.  
Wonderful.  
That's probably the best transaction I think I've ever done.  
So, Tom, we've just moved 10 minutes down the road,  
and we were talking about the Beehive, the Bayeen Gulf,  
and the founder of that haberdashery store.  
The interesting thing about him, Simone Philip Goldschmidt,  
he was Jewish.  
He was.  
As by the 1930s, almost 15% of the population was Jewish.  
Right.  
There were 80,000 in Amsterdam.  
The roots of the Jewish population in Amsterdam  
go back as so much does in this city to the 17th century.  
Right. You amazed me.  
So, you remember that in the first part,  
we were talking about how the Bagheens,  
and the Anabaptists, and the Mennonites,  
and the Remenstrants, and all these various guys  
are setting up their own communities,  
and the Calvinist city authorities  
are kind of legalizing them, kind of not.  
They're kind of operating.  
And the same approach is brought to Jewish settlers,  
and the word gets out to Jews in the Iberian Peninsula,  
Sephardic Jews, as they're called.  
Yeah.  
And particularly from Portugal,  
they start moving to Amsterdam.  
Because this is, of course, the moment at which,

in Spain and Portugal,  
the authorities are moving very aggressively  
against local Jews.  
So, obviously, Amsterdam must seem,  
by comparison, a haven of tolerance.  
Completely. So, in contrast to the inquisition  
that you're getting in Portugal,  
here, within a few years of Jews being allowed to settle here,  
they are allowed to worship openly and freely,  
so they can stop pretending to be kind of Christian,  
and openly practice Judaism.  
And more and more numbers of Jews from Portugal come here.  
And the area that we're in,  
we're just down from the house that Rembrandt bought,  
just a few minutes walk down from there.  
And this became one of, it was kind of like Little Lisbon,  
everyone here speaking in Portuguese.  
And some very famous names came from this community.  
One of them, Manasseh Ben Israel,  
is the rabbi who went to London  
to convince Cromwell to allow Jews to return to England.  
They've been expelled by Edward I.  
He's very successful.  
And probably the most famous name of all is Spinoza,  
the great philosopher who we mentioned a little bit earlier,  
the hero of the radical enlightenment.  
But just going back to Manasseh Ben Israel,  
the guy who gets the Jews into London,  
Bevis Marx, which is the first Jewish synagogue  
to be opened in London in the 17th century,  
is it's rather like the Beguinov.  
There's a doorway on a kind of city street,  
and you wouldn't know what was inside unless you went there.  
But the place that I've brought you to is very, very different,  
because the synagogue here,  
Portuguese synagogue, as it's still called,  
the Asinoga, is on a massive scale.  
It couldn't be less like the Beguinov,  
because it's not inward looking.  
It's a huge monumental building,  
I mean, huge and monumental by any standards,  
but certainly by the standards of 17th century Amsterdam.  
So this is what, 1675, something like that?  
Completed in 1675, and it's designed to look like Solomon's Temple.

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So it's modeled on the proportions given for Solomon's Temple in the Bible.

Inside, it's incredible.

I mean, it has this massive barrel vaulted ceiling, candles everywhere.

Back in 17th century, the floor was made of sand.

So an incredible statement about basically how confident the Jews were in the tolerance of the city that had given them host, that they could advertise their presence in this way.

Without fearing any backlash.

Without fearing any backlash.

Right.

And nothing in Dutch life since the 17th century gives them any reason to think that that will change.

I mean, they're incredibly well integrated.

Yes.

But of course, notoriously, and the one thing that everyone around the world knows about what happens in Amsterdam in the war, is that the Germans invade and the Jews suffer terrible persecution because of the iconic figure of Anne Frank.

Right.

So I was wondering why you haven't picked Anne Frank's house as one of your destinations.

But obviously, this building tells the story just as well.

And it's more surprising choice.

I think it is.

This is testament to the success and the integration of Jews into Dutch life.

Yes.

So the sense of this being a ghetto,

I mean, this was very much where Jews had settled in the 17th century.

But by the 1940s, they've scattered out across Amsterdam.

So the Franks would be an obvious example of that.

They live out beyond the canals.

And so you might think that that would make it difficult for the Nazis to round the Jews up.

But unfortunately not.

Basically, because of two distinctive features of life in Amsterdam and the Netherlands more generally, one of which is that as society in the Netherlands becomes more culturally complex, less monolithically Calvinist, they develop this concept that in English is called pillarization.

This idea that there are different pillars,

so Catholic, Calvinist, whatever, socialist, liberal,

that society is considered forming different pillars

and that therefore you are cataloged and categorized as belonging to one of these particular pillars.

And each pillar has its own institutions, right?

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So it's a vertical integration.

So it has its own newspapers, schools, banks, radio stations, and the Jews are cataloged in the socialist pillar.

So confirming the Nazis' darker suspicions of the Jews.

And that means that they, because they're cataloged, their addresses are on file and they're marked as being Jewish.

Right, okay.

And the other thing is that the Netherlands has Europe's most counterfeit proof identity card.

Right, so you can't escape.

So again, there's kind of no escape.

Now, the process by which the Nazis start to persecute the Jews is gradual.

So the Germans declare war on the Netherlands on the 9th of May, 1940.

Yeah.

I mean, the Dutch, they don't have tanks.

They have two cyclist regiments.

Sorry, I saw a slideshow in the Anne Frank House.

They had two tanks, the guide said, one of which was broken.

And they had a regiment.

Yeah, those regiments are cyclists who were incredibly brave.

I mean, they suffer terrible casualties.

And of course, the reason that the Netherlands surrenders is that Rotterdam gets, the center of Rotterdam gets bombed.

And the surrender is basically, I suppose, what saves Amsterdam.

Because otherwise, the same fate might have been visited on Amsterdam.

So the Germans occupy Amsterdam on the 15th of May.

So that's less than a week after the declaration of war.

And to begin with, because the Dutch are seen as being Aryan, they are part of the racial community that the Nazis are celebrating, the repression in the Netherlands is not as bad as it might have been.

And even Jews are not immediately targeted.

So there's that famous footage.

Again, I'm sure you must have seen it in the Anne Frank House of the Wedding Party.

Which is waving from a window.

Actually, it's waving from a window.

So it's possible for Jews to be seen in public.

But there's this kind of classic ratchet effect.

Jewish teachers get dismissed and then counsellors and more and more prohibitions get brought to...

Accelerated version of what they'd already done in Germany, I suppose.

Completely.

But one of the most striking things that happens in Amsterdam, one of the most heroic episodes in the entire history of the city, is marked by a statue over there.

I'll just point, it's kind of a large, I mean, a fat looking gentleman.

Yeah, sturdy, I think.

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Sturdy gentleman, yes.

And this is a statue of a docker, a worker, to commemorate the extraordinary thing that happened in February 1941, when the unions in Amsterdam staged a general strike. And in part, this was a protest against Dutch citizens in general being moved to Germany to do forced labour.

But it was also specifically a protest against what was happening to the Jews.

So Louis de Jong, historian of Amsterdam, describes this as the first and only anti-pogrom strike in human history.

Right.

And of course, it's a strike that is held by people who assume that the authorities will play by rules that have been laid down in Dutch society for many, many decades.

But the Nazis are not playing by these rules.

And indeed, the structures of bureaucracy are there to be exploited, not to be followed.

Well, because there are lots of people who collaborate with the Nazis, they aren't there.

I mean, of course.

When Anne Frank is finally, when the Franks are finally shipped off to the camps, it's because of when the Dutch police are involved with that.

Yeah.

And actually, Jews in Amsterdam also become complicit.

You know, they're kind of forced into this awful situation.

It's a bit like in the two episodes we did with Jonathan Friedland.

Yeah.

Jews in positions of authority are trying to negotiate with the Nazis, but are basically being kind of drawn to collaborate.

And because the Nazis have access to all these files, these addresses, the identity cards, it's incredibly difficult for Jews to escape.

And so, hence, Anne Frank hiding in the attic.

Yeah.

But the fact is that of all the countries occupied by the Nazis, the Jews in the Netherlands had the lowest survival rate.

So, three out of four Jews who are living in the Netherlands, Jewish, Dutch men and women and children, die.

Then they're taken to the camps.

So, that population of 80,000, 58,000 are killed.

Right.

And obviously, the scale of the human tragedy, which has been so profoundly articulated by the survival of Anne Frank's diary, gives a human face to it.

So, the horror of what happens to the Jews is personalized in Amsterdam in a way that perhaps it isn't in any other city occupied by the Nazis.

I don't know whether you'd agree.

No, I would agree with that.

Yeah.

But I think on top of that, what gives it an extra dimension of horror is that basically,

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Nazism is pretty much the opposite of everything we've been describing that characterizes the civilization of Amsterdam in the modern period.

Internationalist, liberal.

Tolerance.

Let live kind of approach, which the Nazis are having none with.

And for Amsterdam, what sets the final seal on the horrors of the war years is that in the winter of 1944 and 45, when the rest of Europe in the West, so France and Belgium and so on, have been liberated, Holland isn't liberated.

It's a bridge too far, the failure of the Battle of Arnhem.

And that winter is unbelievably terrible.

So the Dutch remember it as the hunger winter and we're sitting outside a flower shop and the Dutch are famous for their gardens.

And many people in Amsterdam were reduced to subsistence on the kind of bulbs.

It's a pretty grim story.

The scale of the famine was terrible.

And so coming out of the war, I think the impact of the war on the city that Amsterdam becomes in the post-war period, famously the great center of liberalism, the city that John and Yoko choose to go to in 1968 to have their bed in.

Of all the cities in the world, they choose Amsterdam for that.

I think that the character of the city, the liberal city,

is massively, massively informed by the horrors of what happened in the war.

Well, before we get onto the liberal city, I'll just say we will definitely return to the story of Anne Frank, because I think it's such a heartbreaking story, both in itself, but also as a way into discussing the experience of the Jewish population of the Netherlands and indeed of Europe in the Second World War.

So I'm sure we'll return to that at a future point.

But I know, Tom, you're very keen to end the episode by talking about Amsterdam's transformation into the most liberal city, arguably in the world, the crucible of kind of 60s liberalism.

And so now we will retrace our steps back towards the old heart of the city.

And Tom Holland will be venturing into the red light district.

So let's go.

So Tom, we've now walked back from the Portuguese synagogue into the old heart of the city.

So we're at the place where Amsterdam was founded.

And I think it's fair to say this is not the part of the city that I would choose to come on a family friendly break.

And yet, I mean, as you say, deeply historic.

So the Udokirche, the oldest church in the city is just around the corner.

Yes.

And the street names, many of them are redolent of medieval Catholic piety.

So we're just standing next to Grau Monneken Kluster, the cloister of the Grey Monks.

That's your lovely Dutch again, really.

Yes.

Thank you.

But the reason that you wouldn't bring people on a family holiday is that this is the epicenter of the kind of the liberal Dutch attitudes to prostitution and to drugs for which Amsterdam is probably the most famous thing about Amsterdam.

It is, exactly.

So more famous in Rembrandt, more famous in the canals.

Or when you say you're going to Amsterdam.

More famous in the glories of 17th century culture.

This is what people think of.

And I just want to make it absolutely clear for the listeners.

I suggested that we walk to look at some more merchants' houses.

But Tom said, no, let's record the next bit opposite a massive neon sign saying sex pass.

So when I was in the Brexit passport queue yesterday and the guy behind the counter saw I was British and asked me very suspicious tones what I was doing here.

Because I think that so many British tourists come here on stag dues, that there's a kind of move by the Dutch authorities.

Tom, that's the wrong way, but you're a trifle old for a stag duty.

Well, I said I'm here due to my love of 17th century Dutch culture.

He waved me through.

But Dominic, the reason that I wanted to bring you here, particularly coming off the horrors that we were discussing by the Portuguese synagogue, is that I think that there is absolutely a case to be made that this kind of hyper liberalism in attitudes towards sex and drugs and indeed to immigration is absolutely a reflection of the trauma that Amsterdam went through in the war.

But I think you could also argue that the roots of 1960s liberalism and the aftermath of that go back even further.

Because throughout these two episodes, we've been talking about this distinctive attitude in Amsterdam whereby things are allowed to operate on the margins of the legal and the illegal.

So we've been talking about Catholics in Calvinist Amsterdam, various assorted religious minorities.

And in a way, the attitudes to sex and drugs here in the Red Light District is a legacy of that.

So there's a continuity between this place, the sex palace that you very kindly brought me to, and the Beguinhof, the beautiful courtyard with the arms houses, because it's basically we're going to turn a blind eye, the thing about turning a blind eye to ensure civic unity.

Yeah. I mean, you would think that the Beguinhof, a place devoted to charity and sexual continence and the sex palace, there could be no greater contrast.

But actually, I think they are expressions of something that is a kind of continuity in the civic culture. But I do think it is specifically a kind of determination to repudiate the legacy of Nazism.

Okay.

So you see this very clearly in the kind of the radical approach to gay rights, which emerges almost immediately after the war.

So in 1946, it's in Amsterdam that you get the world's first organization to advance gay rights.

1964, the chairman of that organization goes on national TV and it's the first kind of openly gay person to appear on Dutch TV. And the 60s across the world, there's a kind of cascade



effect of liberalization. But in the Netherlands, it's very, very radical to the degree that in 2000, the Netherlands becomes the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. Yeah, I can remember. I remember at the time when that happened, there was a sense in the reporting in the international press that this was a sort of outlandish Dutch anomaly.

But of course, the Dutch, as in so many of these post war things, blazing a trail.

So as in the 17th century, so in the 20th and 21st century, Amsterdam remains a city that is kind of setting the beat for the rest of the world. So I think you can also see very clearly a reaction to the horrors of Nazism in the kind of very liberal attitude to immigration.

Right.

So again, from the 70s onwards, increasing immigration to Amsterdam, as indeed across the Netherlands, the notorious coffee, notorious or famous, depending on your attitude, the coffee shops, marijuana, kind of like Catholic chapels in 17th century Amsterdam.

Marijuana isn't legal, but it's not banned if it's sold in private establishments.

So in other words, you can't sell it on the streets, but you can sell it in coffee shops.

Coffee shops, they call them. Yeah.

So this is your Begijnhof parallel again, right?

Yes.

That is behind closed doors.

Yes.

So the Dutch who pioneered the idea of privacy.

Yeah.

So there's a continuing distinction between private behaviour and kind of public morality.

Yes.

Yes. And I guess the ultimate parody perhaps of that is the women who advertise themselves behind glass windows. It's a kind of absolute parody of that kind of idea of the Dutch house, the privacy of the house, and the kind of interface between the privacy and the public.

And the other thing that I think is again very kind of Dutch, very Amsterdam about the way that sex work is organised in Amsterdam is that the women here are casting themselves not just as feminists. So hence, they would call themselves sex workers rather than prostitutes, but they are also very proud of themselves as members of unions. So in the 80s, there was a kind of an organisation called the Red Thread that was an advocacy group. Lots belong to trade unions, condoms, a tax deductible, all this kind of, I mean, it's very, very Amsterdam. I don't know if you saw Harry and Paul, the Harry Enfield and Paul White House, and they have a brilliant kind of evocation of this. I think this idea of what Amsterdam is like abroad. It's Captain Stefan van de Hathgracht of the Amsterdam Police. And it's a Paul White House and it's, you know, they have handcuffs purely for sex games. Right. We're in danger of you doing the entire sketch now,

Tom. But I think it kind of sums up an idea of Amsterdam as anything goes kind of place.

Which is the perception certainly in Britain. I mean, it's obviously just a short hop from Britain. And that's why it's such a massive stag do destination is people go because they think of Amsterdam. Ironically, a Calvinist place, the place of privacy and gentility, I suppose, but modesty and decorum and self-discipline and all these things.

But in Britain today, it is perceived as this hedonistic paradise.

Absolutely. And I think, I mean, I think again, there is these kind of tensions that we've been

exploring throughout the history of Amsterdam that you have, you know, women behind glass windows

advertising themselves naked. And they will, you know, if you're smoking in public where you shouldn't, they'll come out and scold you. Have you put that to the test, Tom?

I haven't. But the, you know, the laws are there to be obeyed. And, you know, if you get, if you jaywalk in Amsterdam, you get in trouble. It's that kind of, it's that kind of, but the laws are still there. It's not a kind of hedonist, anything, anything goes place.

And I think the other thing, so expressive of this desire on the part of the Dutch authorities to rain back on tourists coming here, stag parties and things, is the sense that liberalism in Amsterdam has been pushed to limits, that even the most liberal city in the world doesn't actually like the endpoint. Because one of the things about legalising prostitution and drugs in a world where generally they haven't been legalized is that it enables, say the coffee shops or the, the red light district to become the front for criminal cartels.

I was about to say, I mean, there's a definite sense of, of seediness,

frank, of sleaziness about this area to be completely, and a sense in which

there's always a gray area where you're sliding into the world of organised crime.

I mean, I think it's more than seediness. I think that, you know, it's foreign criminal gangs have used the Netherlands and certainly Amsterdam as centres for kind of mass trafficking of women, mass import of drugs. And that's why the authorities here are trying to kind of rain back on the, the kind of the giddy liberalism of an earlier age.

So there you have the perfect example of the 21st century tensions when you push liberalism to its ultimate extreme. Yes. And I think the most sensitive expression of that is in the dimension of immigration and on the relationship of Dutch liberalism to Islam, because many of the immigrants who've come to Amsterdam are Muslim. And that is obviously part of a tradition that goes right the way back to the Reformation. Yeah, I think some, it's a Hindu. So in the wake of the Holocaust, there was obviously an absolute determination not to in any way imply that there might be attention between the frameworks of Dutch liberalism and Islam. And then suddenly, maybe in the wake of 9-11, that flipped, because another expression of Dutch culture is the tradition of free speech. And so you have long before it happened in neighbouring countries, you had very outspoken people talking from a kind of liberal perspective. So Pimp van Toijn, who is a gay rights campaigner, said, I'm not anti Muslim. I sleep with lots of Muslims, or I just don't like Islam. And he got assassinated not by a Muslim buyer. I think it was by an animal rights protester. But then here in Amsterdam, notoriously, another leading liberal figure who was hostile to Islam was murdered and indeed almost decapitated. And that was Théa Van Gogh, who was a descendant of Vincent Van Gogh. And he made a film called Submission with a woman called

Ayaan Hissay Ali, who was a Somali who'd come here and in a way become completely Dutch. I mean, ready to speak up in defence of liberalism, as she saw it, than many people who'd been born in this country. Hissy Ali and Van Gogh had made a film called Submission, which showed a young Muslim

woman praying, dressed head to toe in Muslim robes, except that she had the middle of her body is exposed and it's covered with verses from the Quran. And as she prays, voiceovers are heard of various Muslim women talking about how they say that the Quran and Quranic law has facilitated their oppression. And this was landed as an explosion. So I think that that kind of tension

between the dictates of liberalism and Islam, the anxieties about racism and anti-racism, that kind of knot, which has been one that people in other countries, including Britain, including America, including France, including Germany have been trying to unpick over the past couple of decades. It was in Amsterdam that that was kind of first really stressed. And there's a sense in Amsterdam generally, correct me if I'm wrong, but that the city authorities have slightly turned away from the ultra liberalism from the 1960s onwards. I think so. There's much more anxiety now in 2023 than at probably any point since the 1960s about the Red Light District, about drugs, about immigration, about all these kinds of things. And Amsterdam, again, is you could argue a paradigm for what's happening in the western world more generally, a turn against what people see as the extremes of kind of hyper liberalism. Yeah. And I think that the traditions of liberalism, of tolerance, of globalization, of hyper capitalism that have been manifest in this city since at least the 17th century are still completely living traditions. And that is why what happens in Amsterdam reverberates across the world. It's full of canals and it's incredibly beautiful, but it's not Venice. It's not a museum piece. This is a city that is still massively influential in the way that Europe and indeed the world thinks. And I think that that is what makes it such an incredible place to visit. You really are not visiting a museum when you come here. So thank you, Tom. That was, dare I say, a panoramic tour de force. A real sense of place, sense of the city, and sense of the way in which it has served is this kind of microcosm of so many developments in European and indeed world history. Now, the good news for our listeners, Tom, is that Ys have created a travel guide to Amsterdam that includes many of the locations that you've talked about in today's episode. Although possibly not the Sex Palace. They'll be very relieved to hear. So to learn more about how you can travel like a historian, you can travel like historian Tom Holland and yet still spend like a local. You can spend like a Dutchman or Dutch woman. Visit [ys.com slash rest is history](https://ys.com/rest-is-history) or click the link in today's description. And on that note, Tom, we say thank you very much. Tom, you're free to go and enjoy the highlights of Amsterdam. Thank you very much. I'm going home and on that bombshell, goodbye.